



November 3, 2020

Re: Recommendations for Equitable Workforce Development in Illinois

To Whom It May Concern:

The outlook for working people in 2020 is dire. COVID-19 has devastated an already inequitable labor market and left many families without a lifeline. Over 2.4 million Illinoisans have filed for unemployment benefits since March, and the state unemployment rate remains high at over 10%. Families are still struggling to access work. The burdens of the pandemic and ensuing economic crisis are hitting Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities in Illinois hardest. The labor market is unpredictable, leaving working Illinoisans struggling to navigate the few jobs that are opening up - and creating greater disparities in the hardest-hit communities in the state. BIPOC workers continue to disproportionately face employment barriers, including occupational segregation, disinvestment, housing, transportation, childcare issues, and others. Added to this, the challenges of COVID-19's health and economic impacts have left many more households unsure how they will stay housed or fed, let alone how they will advance their career.

Illinois must prioritize state and federal funding to invest in education, skills training, and barrier removal to build the foundation for a widely shared recovery and re-skill the workforce for a new landscape. Cultivating and investing in our state's diverse talent can unleash regional innovation, economic growth, and community well-being as the economy recovers. The federal response thus far has not included nearly enough for workforce development, despite unprecedented numbers of unemployed Illinoisans in need of help getting back to work. I am writing to call on legislators to prioritize investments in helping working Illinoisans return to work by funding workforce development programs, designing policy to remove employment barriers that create disparities, and promoting more effective data transparency between state agencies serving Illinoisans, to both help the state better address this economic crisis and to allow our residents to thrive.

The Illinois YouthBuild Coalition operates over a dozen pre-apprenticeship programs across Illinois, serving predominately minority young adults, ages 16-24. Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on our trainees, but they faced challenges with securing quality employment that predate the pandemic. Access to quality jobs and apprenticeship opportunities has historically been challenging for our programs, however we have seen many positive signs over the past few years as more attention is paid to workforce development. Our state's economy will only meet its fullest potential if the most marginalized job seekers are provided with a fair opportunity to participate in the labor market.

To support these young men and women, we recommend the following policy priorities:

1. Use a racial equity lens to invest state funding in inclusive career pathways programming to ensure shared economic recovery for Illinoisans who face barriers to employment.
 - o Direct public resources to the communities most impacted by racism, disinvestment, and the harms of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, state agencies could utilize the map of [Disproportionately Impacted Areas \(DIAs\)](#) to direct not only business and cannabis investments, but workforce and adult ed program dollars.
 - o Limit public workforce dollars to only support businesses that provide family-sustaining pay, benefits, and career pathways.

- Ensure that job seekers can afford to live while building their skills. This can look like:
 - Subsidized employment opportunities;
 - Earn-and-learn models such as apprenticeship;
 - Compensation for participation in education/training programs.
 - Establish a flexible Barrier Reduction Fund to directly assist job seekers overcome acute barriers to employment (such as childcare, housing, technology access, and transportation.)
 - Restore and increase funding for the Job Training and Economic Development (JTED) Program to connect adults with skills training in in-demand sectors.
 - Fund critical strategies for inclusive and equitable Apprenticeships, with a focus on wraparound supports and barrier reduction, school/employer partnerships, and pre-apprenticeship programs that build foundational skills.
 - Invest \$100 million in MAP grants to move towards providing need-based aid to all eligible students.
 - Support job seekers on SNAP by investing state dollars in SNAP Employment & Training (since every dollar is eligible for a federal match.)
 - Increase funding for Adult Education and Literacy programs to ensure every adult needing services has the opportunity to transition to postsecondary education or training.
 - Invest in demand-driven skills training and job placement services for people with criminal records.
 - Ensure any public investments in clean energy promote inclusive and equitable access to jobs and green job training - like the Clean Energy Jobs Act.
 - **Provide increased, permanent funding for the Illinois YouthBuild Act to offer paid training and work opportunities to low-income youth.**
2. Align policy to eliminate non-skill barriers to employment disproportionately faced by people of color, foreign-born workers, and women in Illinois.
 - Support Paid Sick Days to ensure low-wage workers do not have to lose their jobs or pay due to illness and family emergencies.
 - Eliminate driver's license suspensions for failure to pay tickets, fines, fees, or child support, and for failure to appear in court.
 - Support policies to prevent housing insecurity and homelessness, such as enhanced eviction protections, increased rental and mortgage assistance, and rent cancellation.
 - Support policies that move us toward universal broadband and technology access to learners and job seekers can connect with opportunity.
 3. Increase data sharing and transparency across state agencies that touch education and workforce training to identify and address equity gaps in our public investments.

We believe that these policy changes will allow our participants and graduates to overcome barriers to employment, build the skills that they need for in-demand occupations and retain the jobs that can support them and their families. Investing in YouthBuild is a win-win scenario for both jobseekers and employers and can help Illinois make a more equitable recovery.

Sincerely,

Kerry Knodle
Immediate Past President